

'Robust action' required to assist growing number of refugees on Greek islands – UN

8 September 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency today urged “robust action” to improve conditions on Greece’s eastern Aegean islands, where the number of new refugee arrivals increased last month.

“In August, there have been 3,695 sea arrivals compared to 2,249 in July,” [said](#) Cécile Pouilly, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), at a press briefing in Geneva.

“While there has been progress to date, UNHCR is calling for robust action to improve conditions in reception facilities. We are also calling for the urgent deployment of additional national services staff, especially in the areas of health, psychosocial support and protection of unaccompanied children,” she added.

According to UNHCR, the situation is most worrying on Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Leros, which have received the largest number of arrivals, including many children. More than half come from conflict-hit Syria and Iraq.

The full management of the response to the refugee situation on the islands is being transferred from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations to the Greek authorities.

Calling it “a challenging period,” Ms. Pouilly said that arrivals on Lesbos, Samos and Leros have outpaced the rate at which people are being authorized by the authorities to transfer to the mainland – further worsening already very challenging living conditions.

“Estimated departures for the mainland last month were 2,561 against 3,695 arrivals, based on data from the authorities,” she flagged.

In addition, conditions have affected the physical and mental health of many of the people who have been staying on the islands for months. The threat of violence, self-harm and sexual assault is extremely worrying and more security is needed, said the agency.

“The situation is most critical in Samos,” she said. “Despite the recent transfer of some 640 people to the mainland from the island, more than 1,900 people remain crammed into an area meant for 700 at the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) in Vathy. Among them there are more than 600 children – as well as pregnant women, serious medical cases and people with disabilities.”

UNHCR voiced concern at the growing risks to their health and welfare, due to water shortages and poor hygienic conditions. The agency has been providing aid, such as blankets, mats, sleeping bags, hygiene kits, baby care and

female dignity kits.

“On Chios,” Ms. Pouilly said, “there were more than 500 arrivals in August. The Vial RIC has over 1,100 people, including over 100 people without proper accommodation. Most are staying in containers and some new arrivals are in 12 tents recently installed by UNHCR.”

Some 180 people also remain at the municipality-run Souda site, which has long been earmarked for closure.

Speaking about Lesbos, she maintained that “tension remains high at the Moria RIC, which has been twice rocked by riots in recent weeks in protest at the slow pace of registration and asylum processing for certain nationalities, as well as the crowded conditions.”

In August, there were 1,052 arrivals on Lesbos, and over 700 in the first week of September. Lesbos hosts some 5,000 people.

Turning to Leros, Ms. Pouilly pointed out that “more than 290 arrivals were recorded in August, and the number of people on the island stood on Friday at 649. This puts a strain on capacity in understaffed Government-run sites, including Lepida RIC.”

UNHCR is helping the Greek Government to identify gaps in the transition period and continues providing targeted services in child protection, support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, relief items, transportation, and interpretation with a recent grant from the European Commission.